

READING

African Americans and Serial Killing in the Media*The Myth and the Reality***Anthony Walsh**

In this article, Anthony Walsh explores why so few black serial killers are known to the public, or even to many criminologists. There were many expressions of shock and surprise voiced in the media in 2002 when the “D.C. Sniper” turned out to be two black males. Two of the stereotypes surrounding serial killers are that they are almost always white males and that African American males are barely represented in their ranks. In a sample of 413 serial killers operating in the United States from 1945 to mid-2004, it was found that 90 were African American. Relative to the African American proportion of the population across that time period, African Americans were overrepresented in the ranks of serial killers by a factor of about 2. Possible reasons why so few African American serial killers are known to the public are explored.

In the movie *Copycat*, Sigourney Weaver plays a criminal psychologist and expert on serial killing. In the opening scene, she is giving a lecture in which she asks all the males in the audience to stand, emphasizing that serial killing is primarily a male behavior. She then asks all African American and Asian American males to sit down, leaving only White males standing as representative of serial killers. The message that viewers of *Copycat* get is that only White males commit these heinous crimes and that members of other races or ethnicities never do.

This stereotype is pervasive in the United States. A commentator in the *Harlem Times* expressed shock and disbelief when the D.C. Sniper turned out to be two Blacks, because “white guys have pretty much cornered the market on mass murders and serial killing” (Charles, 2002). Psychologist Na’im Akbar stated, “This is not typical conduct for us. I mean Black folks do

some crazy stuff, but we don’t do anonymous violence. That’s not in our history. We just don’t do that” (in White, Willis, & Smith, 2002: 2).

It is one of the mysteries of modern criminology that a group responsible for a highly disproportionate number of homicides of all other types has gained a reputation for not producing serial killers. For instance, data from the period encompassing 1976 through 1998 reveal that African Americans committed 51.5% of the recorded homicides in the United States (Fox & Levin, 2001). Between 1946 and 1990, homicide rates among Black males have ranged from 6.56 times the White male rate in 1984 to 15.78 times the White male rate in 1952 (LaFree, 1996).

There is no doubt that White males have constituted the majority of multiple murderers in the United States, but White males have constituted the vast majority of males across that time period. However, recent data for the years

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